7 Dec 1972

Impending CIA bloodletting?

It would be easier to evaluate the partially "confirmed" rumor that Richard M. Helms is about to bow to pressure to resign as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency if one were able to get some kind of fix on the CIA itself. The virtually impenetrable secrecy that surrounds every phase of CIA activities, however, reduces one to an evaluation of such extraneous but relevant facts as are available, and there is no excess of comfort in any of these.

It is disconcerting to learn, for example, that the background of Mr. Helms's dissatisfaction (or president Nixon's dissatisfaction with him) includes disputes with both Henry Kissinger, Mr. Nixon's foreign policy adviser, and Melvin Laird, the retiring Secretary of Defense.

Mr. Laird's quarrel with Mr. Helms reportedly stems from their disagreement in 1969 when Mr. Laird insisted that the Soviets were maneuvering to attain a "first-strike capability" against the US and Mr. Helms insisted that Moscow had in no way shifted from its traditional emphasis on defense. That we are all still here may not prove conclusively that Mr. Laird was wrong and Mr. Helms was right, but we ARE still here.

His dispute with Mr. Kissinger, or vice versa, was predictable a year ago when Mr. Nixon set up an intelligence committee within the National Security Council and made Mr. Kissinger its head. Whether Mr. Nixon is perhaps giving Mr. Kissinger too much authority and is spreading him too thin would be a subjective judgment incapable, for now at least, of objective proof.

But the reputed Kissinger objection that Mr. Helms "was not supporting the Administration" in committee councils raises an interesting question. The CIA director's chief function, one would think, is not to support the Administration or Dr. Kissinger either, when the facts as he knows them dictate otherwise. His job is to let the facts fall where they may.

Mr. Nixon spoke highly of Mr. Helms just a year ago when he announced that Mr. Helms would assume "enhanced leadership" in planning, reviewing, coordinating and evaluating all intelligence programs and activies. By most estimates, he had earned the accolade.

For one thing, he had both the wisdom and the courage to oppose the CIA's disastrous attempt to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, opposing not only the then CIA hierarchy but also the admirals and generals in the Pentagon. President Kennedy thereafter was as leery of Pentagon counsel as Mr. Helms had been. "If it wasn't for the Bay of Pigs, I might have sent Marines into Laos in 1961, as a lot of people around here wanted me to do."

Mr. Helms showed his perspicacity also in 1967 when Air Force intelligence insisted that bombing would bring North Vietnam to its kness, and Mr. Helms said that it would unite the North Vietnamese and firm up their resolve to fight to the death if necessary. Lyndon Johnson could have saved his Presidency and the war could have been ended long ago if the White House had listened to the facts of the situation rather than the politics of it.

One does not lightly endorse a secret police agency even when, as in the case of the CIA under Mr. Helms, "we do not target on American citizens." But so long as superspies are one of the facts of international life, one rests somewhat more comfortably when the top spy, so far as one is able to judge, is competent and conscientious and sticks to the hard facts without bending to political winds.